New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1951

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK MIRROR

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"Top Banana"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

November 2, 1951

'Banana' Swooshes In With Explosive Roar

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Broadway became Broadway again last night with a rip and a roar, as "Top Banana" opened at the Winter Garden.

The new musical zooms through the evening with a laughing swoosh that leaves your hair mussed, your ears ringing and your stomach muscles limp. It gives television a satirical blasting that is wildly irreverent but not vindictive. And it ends up recalling the crazy endearing worst of burlesque in a fantastic parody.

"Top Banana" is a study of that strange animal, the comic, in this case, as per the title, the top clown from the runway, now graduated to the pictorial air waves. Phil Silvers is on the stage nearly every moment of the evening, in a performance that has the sort of indefatigable show business know-how that marks the real stars.

Most modern comics constantly let you know how funny they think they are. Silvers only lets you know how much fun he is having. It is a world of difference.

Laughs and a Story, Too.

Laughs are as usual as grains of sand on Jones Beach, but in and out between them, there runs a story. In the title role, Silvers is the frantic, bossy, jealous, talented roadhog of a television show. Through some complicated ramifications he helps the girl he loves to elope with a singer, loses his show from the sponsor, and wins it back again for the curtain.

It is no coincidence that Milton Berle was sitting down front last night, laughing his head off. It would even seem that he co-operated to the extent of being sued by his ghost writer this week. In the musical, Silvers has an autobiography that is tough to handle, too.

Topping the Toppers.

This Burton Holmes travelogue of the comic includes every good joke in the roster. It even has six men at once imitating Jimmy Durante. One wonderful number flashes along on all the classic old bits from burlesque. And it frequently moves into the ad lib method of rivals topping each others gags on the same subject.

Although the first act is the one that leaves you with the same dazed look as the passing nearby of a jet plane, two of the funniest things in the show are in the second act. One is the burlesque revival, and the other a complicated athletic comedy of errors that was a staple of vaudeville for years.

The score of Johnny Mercer's is wonderfully rythmic and gay, and between them, Jo Mielziner and Alvin Colt have done scenery and costumes that make their colorful points in major colors like blood red, mustard yellow and Irish green.

She Sells the Songs.

Rose Marie walks off with honors when she discusses her beau in prize-fighting terms to music, and again with Silvers in a complicated series of tuneful plays on words. She sets the spirit of the show, that selling the songs is much more important than vocalizing.

Judy Lynn and Lindy Doherty are the youthful lovers, and sing with all that modern, popular, throbbing, tearing out of their hearts and their vocal chords, and look natural and attractive. Bob Scheerer has two strong dance solos, which reveal new positiveness in an engaging personality.

From the time he starts blowing kisses to his mirror, through his troubles with whistles, glasses, funny hats and love, Phil Silvers wraps up a hilarious juggernaut of a dynamic evening. If there was one more ounce of authoritative energy on the stage than this company generates, the house would explode.

"TOP BANANA"

Musical comedy with words and music by Johnny Mercer; book by Hy Kraft; staged by Jack Donohue; settings by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Alvin Colt; choreography by Ron Fletcher; presented by Paula Stone and Mike Sloane at the Winter Garden Theatre, November 1, 1951. The cast:

Danny.....Eddie Hanley
Script Girl.....Eve Hebert
Bubble Girls...Beverly Weston and Sara Dillon
Vic Davis.....Jack Albertson
Tommy.....Bob Scheerer
Walter.....Walter Dare Wahl
Jerry Biffle.....Phil Silvers
Cliff Lane.....Lindy Doherty
Moe.....Herbie Faye
Pinky.....Joey Faye
Betty Dillon.....Rose Marie
Sally Peters.....Judy Lynn
A Man.....Johnny Trama
Models.....Marion Burke and Basha Regis
Russ Wiswell.....Zachary A. Charles
Mr. Parker.....Brad Hatton
Announcer.....Dean Campbell
Featured Dancers...Hal Loman and Joan Fields
TV Technician.....Ken Harvey
Miss Pillsbury...Betsy Holland
Dr. Leroy.....Doug Luther
Stagehand.....Don Covert
Ted (Sport) Morgan..By Himself
Dance Team.....Bob Scheerer and Polly Ward
Juggler.....Claude Heater
A Passing Girl...Mary Harmon
The Widow.....Judy Sinclair
The Magician's Assistant...Basha Regis
"Bubbles".....Gloria Smith

Synopsis: Act I, Scene 1, TV Studio. Scene 2, Dressing Room. Early next morning. Scene 3, The Gown Shop, MacCracken's store. Scene 4, In front of elevator. Scene 5, The Book Department. Scene 6, Interior of elevator. Scene 7, The Fitting Room. Scene 8, TV Studio. Act II, Scene 1, TV Studio. Scene 2, 40W, 82d st. Scene 3, Vignettes. Scene 4, Dressing Room. Scene 5, Top Banana. Scene 6, Dressing Room. Scene 7, TV Studio.

Journal American

November 2, 1951

Winter Garden Show Is All Phil Silvers'

By ROBERT GARLAND

Brash is the adjective for Phil Silvers' show which Paula Stone and Mike Sloane have brought into the Winter Garden. Called "Top Banana" after an ancient burlesque saying, Mr. Silvers is it. He occupies the stage most of the evening and proves that you—that I, at any rate—can get enough of a good thing.

For let it be said that Phil Silvers is a good thing. He was a good thing in "High Button Shoes" until Eddie Foy and Joey Faye took over. He is a good thing in "Top Banana." But he is not good enough to carry things all evening. Not even with Milton Berle in stitches in the large approving audience.

That is why, with book by Hy Kraft, songs by Johnny Mercer, dances by Ron Fletcher and settings by Jo Mielziner, "Top Banana" is in need of someone to help Phil Silvers out. Rose Marie, the official leading lady, does not. Neither does Judy Lynn, the leading lady. Only Bob Scheerer seems worthy of the assignment.

And Mr. Scheerer is a dancer, a dancer who came East in "Lend An Ear." He is going places, that young man, if directors let him alone. He is doing things right now.

* * *

A Book Show

In the beginning, "Top Banana" is what is called a book show. It has a story. Mr. Kraft's story is about a television comedian who might be the Mr. Berle across the aisle from me. Having never seen him on the TV, I cannot be sure. I would think the original's gags were better, though borrowed.

Something goes wrong with the on-stage entertainment. Unfamiliar as I am with television, I do not know what. But, in the long last act, Phil Silvers finds himself without a program. So he puts on a dream entertainment of his own. The scenery parts and even a little dog—Ted Sport Morgan by name—has his play.

And "Top Banana" is not top banana any more. It is not much of any one thing. Ted Sport Morgan barks his singing bark, Phil Silvers gets his fingers caught by a couple of other fellows and, because it is time, the finale is sung by the entire company and the curtain falls at the Winter Garden on Broadway.

I have almost forgotten to tell you that there is a small ballet by Mr. Silvers and ensemble which is much like the [illegible] ballet in "High Button

* * *

He Gives Out

This "Top Banana" being Phil Silvers' show, maybe you will understand me when I say that, liking him as I do, he gives out before the show is over. He hardly can help it. He works so hard and heartily in the opening act that he has little left for the closing. And what little he has left is too much for him to carry.

Rose Marie, who has spent 25 of her 28 years in show business,

puts over a song whenever she has one. Judy Lynn sings like an escapist from the radio. As official leading woman and leading woman respectively, they may be adequate. Joey Faye, a lecturer at Yale, is a well established standby.

Of Bob Scheerer, the dancer, I have already spoken highly. The others, Jack Albertson, Lindy Doherty, Bradford Hatton, Herbie Faye, Walter Dare Wahl, Zachary Charles, Hal Loman, Eddie Hanley, Joan Fields and Johnny Trama, are featured. The orchestra, under Harold Hastings, is so noisy that I cannot hear Johnny Mercer's music.

"Top Banana" at the Winter Garden is all Phil Silvers' new musical comedy. Admiring Mr. Silvers as I like to, I wish he would do something about it. I bet he knows what. And why.

New York Post

November 2, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

Phil Silvers, With Interruptions

The one man among the newer stage comics who seems worthy of the company of such surviving masters as Bobby Clark and Bert Lahr is Phil Silvers, and he has never been in better form than he is in "Top Banana." Since the new musical comedy, which opened at the Winter Garden last night, provides him and a few of his rowdy associates with an opportunity to frolic through some of the basic materials of their art, it has several of the funniest scenes in the recent history of the theater, and I am certainly grateful to it for them. I only wish I could say that the rest of the show lived up to the peak of its hilarity.

Indeed, I laughed so unashamedly at Mr. Silvers and his pals that I prefer to put off my complaints for a while and talk about the comics. The star of "Top Banana" appears as a celebrated television clown, and there were those in the audience last night who seemed to recognize the original of the portrait. Anyway, the eminent figure is a high-pressure fellow, who exists only for his gags and lives in a continuous state of uproar, constantly surrounded by his writers and sycophants. Mr. Silvers plays him with wonderful ease and relish, and it is when he and his associate buffoons swing madly into action that the show is a delight.

Anthology of Clowning

Running through their routines with machine-gun speed, using every conceivable gag, the more shameless the better, with the sure timing of the old burlesque comics, the funny men of "Top Banana" provide a kind of anthology of vigorous clowning that is fearsome and joyous. There are a few inside television jokes that rather escaped me, but when Mr. Silvers and his colleagues get their hands madly entangled while trying to help out in an elopement I found myself recognizably close to hysterics, while there is a dream sequence about an old-time burlesque show that cheered me enormously.

Why, then, when Mr. Silvers, Joey Faye and the rest of the boys were cutting up so comfortingly and were given so many admirable opportunities, did so much of "Top Banana" seem disappointing? Well, for one thing, there is a book of some sort to go with the proceedings, and it is pretty dismal. In fact, it is amazing to me that the same people who could devise so much good, rowdy comedy couldn't have thought up a better plot to get in its way. There is even a kind of love story about an ingenue and a tenor, and it is very depressing.

The Music

Then, too, the brilliant Johnny Mercer, who has written some of the best lyrics and composed some of the most memorable songs in American popular music, has provided a curiously commonplace score that didn't sound worthy of him last evening. There is a passable song named after the show and another fairly good one that owes a bow to sports columnist Dan Parker for its idea, but, in general, the music of "Top Banana" struck me as amazingly uninteresting, particularly considering its source. And a young woman calling herself Rose Marie depressed me considerably by singing what seemed to me one of the longest songs in history.

In the end, "Top Banana" suffers greatly from split personality. Its star is a constant joy and its book and music are anything else. One thing is certain. Whatever the gravity of its faults, the new musical comedy places the name of Phil Silvers very definitely in the list of the current theater's great men. He has the authentic and zestful skill of the true comedian, and he is just about as funny a man as the theater has offered us in a long while. If he and Joey Faye and the rest of the boys were permitted to carry on without so much interruption from outsiders, all would be sunshine and happiness in this corner today.

DAILY NEWS

November 2, 1951

'Top Banana' a Loud, Fast, Funny Musical Show at Winter Garden

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"Top Banana," which opened at the Winter Garden last evening, is a good, old-fashioned Broadway musical. If these words look like faint praise, they are not meant so, for at the premiere I had an old-fashioned good time laughing at loud jokes, looking at pretty girls and watching Phil Silvers give a phenomenal performance of a comedian on the loose.

I am not ashamed to say that it never occurred to me to think of the art of the modern musical theatre, and I lost track of the plot about an hour and a half before Hy Kraft, the author, did. It may be that Johnny Mercer's lyrics are smart and his tunes are hits, but somehow I never found time for critical listening. There wasn't time enough for anything, really, and I left the Winter Garden thinking that enough unimportant nonsense had been forgotten or left out to make another good, old-fashioned Broadway musical.

TV Revives Burleycue.

The theme of "Top Banana" is that a group of burlesque comedians, headed by Mr. Silvers, find themselves in business again on television. Mr. Silvers, being the top banana, or head comedian of a burleycue outfit, steals all the bows, has already stolen all the gags and runs his TV show like a lunatic who fancies himself a genius. Now and again a boy-girl romance between a tenor and a soprano is allowed to emerge, but only long enough for the pair to sing a love song and then run for the wings.

Silvers has always been a funny fellow and in the new show he is at the top of his career. I hope he manages to live through the run of the show—and I hope that each midnight, after he catches his breath, he gives thanks to the director, Jack Donohue, for keeping up the slam-bang pace of the entertainment.

Some of author Kraft's shots at TV programs and TV commercials are accurately satirical, but "Top Banana" doesn't put on any airs about being a musical satire. All it seems to want is for things to get going as soon as the curtain goes up and keep on going until the curtain comes down—a simple and honest ambition that some of our modern musical theatre might wish it had.

Funny Burlesque Sequence.

Mr. Silvers has any number of playmates. He is followed by a large number of really good-looking young ladies who are never too properly attired in Alvin Colt's excellent costumes. He is either helped or impeded, according to the way one looks and listens, by such singers as Rose Marie, Judy Lynn and Lindy Doherty. He is abetted by some grand burlesquers and vaudevillians, including Herbie Faye, Joey Faye, Walter Dare Wahl, Johnny Trama, Eddie Hanley and a dog named Ted (Sport) Morgan who can sing louder and funnier than any of them. For dancing there are Bob Scheerer and Polly Ward, both good.

For me the highlight of "Top Banana" is Mr. Silvers' montage of reminiscences of the old burlesque days and the old burlesque gags, which is a small miracle of staging and costuming. (Incidentally, the show is clean.) Mr. Colt's costumes for the old comedian types, from the cop to the tramp, are works of fine imagination and humor—and when it comes to dressing the girls he quite sensibly takes leave of imagination and becomes practical.

The sets, devised by Jo Mielziner, are just right for the show, being bright and sassy. At the Winter Garden last evening I felt just like a tired business man—and it felt good.

The New York Times

November 2, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Phil Silvers will have to look after his health this winter. He is king-pin in a very funny musical show that ought to last as long as he can. In honor of the top clowns in burlesque theatre, it is called "Top Banana"; and it opened with a bang at the Winter Garden last evening.

Strictly speaking, it is the lampoon of some television comic who is a colossal egotist and also has talent. No one can imagine who that can be. But Hy Kraft, who put this circus together, has not wasted much time on the literal parody of a funny megalomaniac.

* * *

For Phil Silvers comes out of burlesque, and "Top Banana" is a fast and insane low comedy rumpus. Mr. Silvers is that tall, lean, toothy mountebank with a bald head and horn-rimmed glasses. After learning his trade the hard way, he took centre of the stage in "High Button Shoes" in 1947.

That was funny enough for most purposes. But in "Top Banana" Mr. Silvers is completely hilarious, throwing gags helter-skelter at high speed and running through some uproarious burlesque routines. According to the book, he is the protean star of a television show with great ingenuity in promoting himself and a rapacious talent for exploiting other people.

The book is caustic and the characters it introduces are fantastic. "Top Banana" looks a little like an illiterate "Guys and Dolls." But none of it is more devastatingly comic than when Mr. Silvers and his gang abandon the book and drop back into the old burlesque hokum. Mr. Silvers is not a relaxed buffoon. He works hard over every antic.

Unless he is also Superman he will be a physical wreck before "Top Banana" is a decade old and he will lose what voice he has left at the moment. But this column hopes that he will husband his strength as frugally as possible. For this is a very funny show; and things being as they are at the moment, the country needs it sorely.

* * *

There is nothing beside the skulduggery in "Top Banana" that need detain you long. Johnny Mercer's score is hackneyed. He has composed it as though he hoped it would not sound like music—successfully from this point of view. No one has much of a voice, and the hot ballet is awful. Even Jo Mielziner's scenery looks as though he has tried half-heartedly to keep it commonplace.

Some friendly people like Rose Marie, Judy Lynn, Eddie Hanley and Lindy Doherty fill in pleasantly the spots between the explosions of comedy. Jack Donohue, the director, has pulled all the details together into a brisk-paced show. But the comedians are masters of the "Top Banana" revels—Joey Faye, Herbie Faye, Jack Albertson, Walter Dare Wahl and Johnny Trama. And most of all Mr. Silvers, who knows all about slapstick. He better take plenty of vitamins this coming winter.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

November 2, 1951

By WALTER F. KERR

Ripe and Luscious

IT'S all right this morning—you can start going to the theater again. "Top Banana" isn't the kind of show that is ever going to the Berlin Festival, but it's a hearty, cheerful, fast and funny roughhouse which has dipped deep into the ragbag of old burlesque tricks and come up with the cream. It has a fine, bright party-going air about it, and it warms up the season a lot.

The show at the Winter Garden is a field day for Phil Silvers, who has grown into a happy and confident comedian in the past few years. Cast as a onetime burlesque comedian who is now going through the agonies of holding onto his television rating, Silvers clowns through the evening looking remarkably like an enraged rabbit. He spends most of his time casting a jaundiced eye at his fellow performer and, even allowing for those glasses, he seems to have an extraordinary assortment of jaundiced eyes. His voice runs the gamut from a high treble squeal to a thin, resonant rasp, his timing is perfect, and his manner—even when he is at his most aggressive—is wonderfully innocent.

When the comedian is thrown onto the stage with his retinue of gagmen, yes-men, and the men who laugh before he has said anything at all, the show really rolls. The satire—presumably directed at Uncle Miltie—doesn't honestly cut very deep. But it provides an excuse for three or four exhibitions of rousing teamwork—in a title number which steals freely from the days on the Columbia wheel, in a shouted song called "O. K. for T. V.," and finally in a delicious quintet which has one of those television dogs for its lead tenor.

Silvers is enthusiastically assisted in these hoke fests by Jack Albertson, Joey Faye, Herbie Faye, Eddie Hanley and Zachary A. Charles. But the show is all his, whether his is blowing an expressive whistle in his effort to curtail his television competition, or doubling as a toupeed tenor in an old-fashioned production number. "Top Banana" hits its logical high spot in this last potpourri, a resume of everything that killed Minsky's. It has been done before, maybe a dozen times since "Strip for Action" had a whack at it. But it has never been better fun.

The evening isn't all bright spots. Although Lindy Doherty makes an engaging juvenile and Judy Lynn is a very pretty girl, the romantic subplot is as conventional as ever. There are times when librettist Hy Kraft gets too far away from his sources in the tried and true routines and saddles his performers with some not-so-bright witticisms of his own. And there is a momentary touch of desperation in a second-act vaudeville interpolation which puts the hard-working comics to the even harder work of making anything fresh out of the business of tangling hands.

But there is much to be grateful for. Jo Mielziner has given "Top Banana" some bright and buoyant sets. He has been especially successful in bringing musical comedy feeling to the unlikely precincts of a department store. Dancer Bob Scheerer has come a long way in the two years since "Lend an Ear"; he can carry a tune now, reads lines with the best of them, and his contribution to the "Top Banana" ballet is stylish and ingratiating.

Johnny Mercer's tunes are brisk and showy. His lyrics lean a little heavily on a somewhat picky verbal humor, and he comes a cropper with a second-act song called "A Word a Day." But this is a minor qualification about a listenable score. "Top Banana" scours the byways for its material, but it whips them into a colorful, sunny show.

Daily Mirror

November 2, 1951

'Top Banana' Top Satire, Phil Is Its Silver Lining

By ROBERT COLEMAN

That uproar you heard in the neighborhood of Broadway and 51st Street last night wasn't blasting for the foundation of a new building, but a smart audience splitting its sides laughing at "Top Banana," the town's newest musical comedy click. The first-nighters really knocked themselves out. We haven't heard yaks like those that vibrated the Winter Garden's rafters for many a season.

"Top Banana" is no "Oklahoma!" or "South Pacific." It doesn't pretend to be. But it is an immensely funny satire on TV and burlesque. It's a champ in a different way. It has the wallop of a heavyweight and the pace of a fast express. If you want to howl and have a high old time of it, you'd better rush to the box-office immediately. Late-comers are going to have to wait a long time for their ducats.

There is a sketchy plot about an energetic video star who insists on supervising everything on his program. This publicity-mad ex-burlesquer even arranges an elopement to make the front pages. The scheme backfires, and a tenor gets the girl. But that doesn't really matter, because Jerry Biffle is more concerned with his Hooper rating and bank account than romance.

However, it is the hilarious take-offs on burlesque bits and several sock novelty acts that make "Top Banana" a laugh riot. Phil Silvers, emerging as a big star last evening, is terrific as Jerry Biffle. He is in command all the way, and, being an ex-burlycue boy, knows how to kid that institution with authority.

Getting twisted up into incredible tangles with Walter Dare Wahl and Johnny Trama, leading a quartet that includes a singing dog, or spoofing corny hoke with Eddie Hanley, Jack Albertson, Herby Faye and Joey Faye, Silvers had the customers falling into the aisles.

Lindy Doherty and Judy Lynn are attractive as the romantics. Bob Scheerer, Hal Loman and Joan Fields are sizzling steppers. "Baby" Rose Marie, now a grown-up girl and blondly pretty, goes to town with some of the snappier Johnny Mercer songs. An onrushing deadline prevents our singling out others in the large cast for the mention they deserve.

Producers Paula Stone and Mike Sloane have used their budget wisely and generously. Jo Mielziner's settings and Alvin Colt's costumes accurately catch the flavor of the Hy Kraft-Mercer musical. Director Jack Donohue and choreographer Ron Fletcher are other assets.

Among the Mercer candidates for the Hit Parade are "My Home Is in My Shoes," "Sans Souci," "That's For Sure" and "A Word a Day." We suspect you'll be dancing to them in the local bistros and hearing them over the air as you make ready for the office in the morning.

"Top Banana" is a breezy, brash and bouncy hit. We recommend it as a sure-fire antidote for the blues. We think you'll love it, unless you hate to laugh.

"Barefoot in Athens"

Journal American

November 1, 1951

Couldn't Be More Timely—or Needed

By ROBERT GARLAND

In his latest play, "Barefoot in Athens," which is now at the Martin Beck, Maxwell Anderson is certain that democracy will have to serve until something better comes along. All men of good will must agree. Fallible as our system of government may ofttimes be, it is the best on earth so far. For it is free.

Mr. Anderson uses Socrates as his example of a freeman. I do not see how he could choose a finer one. Above all else, he is simple-minded. And with the gift of gab. He believes in his Athens without approving of everything it does. It may drive him to the hemlock. But it drives him democratically.

"Barefoot in Athens" is as direct as that. Anybody can show us our faults. Almost everybody has. But nobody has shown us our virtue. Not as simple-mindedly as last night's play. Purposely, the playwright has not allowed himself to be distracted. You, as an Athenian, may be this or that.

But you are free. And your freedom is, too frequently, not the one hope of man until you lose it. That is "Barefoot in Athens." That and little more.

* * *

Maxwell Anderson's play is Shavian in its approachment to playwriting. Nothing happens. Nothing, but everything. You meet Socrates in his own home of the Fifth Century, B. C. You meet Xantippe, his wife who keeps house for him, and his offspring, who I believe are three. Or maybe only two.

Gradually, as "Barefoot in Athens" moves to the wall, the market-place and the cell, with Socrates' home in between, you meet some of the citizens, too. And Pausanias and other momentarily victorious outsiders. They make separate groups of democrats and democracy's ill-wishers. Only the ill-wishers are united.

And, in the course of time, the ununited Athenians are in debate beneath the forum. Socrates is on trial. Socrates and everything he stands for. Socrates and everything he stands for lose. For it is by losing that they win. If it were not for the hemlock, Socrates would be John Doe of Athens.

Dead, Socrates is a freeman. You, no more than he, would not wish to have it otherwise. In every freeman's name, you must guard your freedom dearly.

* * *

The Playwrights' Company, sponsoring "Barefoot in Athens," has cast it with rare discrimination. This is notably so in the case of Barry Jones as Socrates. In an actionless assignment, he makes his great one great. As an established actor, he has played Bernard Shaw here. His Athenian is Shavian.

Lotte Lenya is a perfect Xantippe. Widow of Kurt Weill, she has appeared in "The Three Penny Opera" as given in Town Hall, as well as "The Firebrand of Florence" and "Candle in the Wind." Abroad, she has done everything. George Mathews is himself as Pausanias. That is fine. The supporting cast is excellent.

The direction by Alan Anderson is less fluid than I would have it. The backgrounds by Boris Aronson lack imagination. And the lighting. The costumes by Bernard Rudofsky serve. Socrates and his family can not hope to be dressy Athenians. All they have they give to democracy. Including one great life, a symbol.

"BAREFOOT IN ATHENS"

Play by Maxwell Anderson; staged by Alan Anderson; settings by Boris Aronson; costumes by Bernard Rudofsky; presented by the Playwrights' Company at the Martin Beck Theatre, October 31, 1951. The cast:

Xantippe	Lotte Lenya
Lamprocles	Robert Brown
Lysis	Judson Rees
Phoenix	Robin Michael
Socrates	Barry Jones
Crito	Daniel Reed
Phaedo	William Bush
Critobulus	Stratton Walling
Theodote	Helen Shields
Anytos	David J. Stewart
Meletos	Bruce Hall
Lykon	William Hansen
Crassos	Karl Light
Satyros	Bart Burns
Guards	Edward Groag and John McLiam
Critias	Philip Coolidge
Pausanias	George Mathews
Magistrate	Joseph Warren

Synopsis: The action takes place in Athens, near the end of the Fifth Century, B. C. Act I, Scene 1. In the house of Socrates. Breakfast time. Scene 2. At the wall of Athens. Around noon, several months later. Scene 3. In Socrates' house. A half hour later.

"Barefoot in Athens" is a Socratic talkfest about democracy, what it means to have it, what it will mean not to hold it. It could not be more timely. Or more called for.

New York Post

November 1, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Trial and Death of Socrates

In "Barefoot in Athens," which opened at the Martin Beck last night, Maxwell Anderson has combined Plato with the fruits of his own meditations on democracy and the right of free inquiry in a drama about the trial and death of Socrates that is the most impressive work for the theater he has provided since the distinguished days of "Winterset." It is uneven and there are times when it seems to languish, but it has eloquence, the excitement of ideas, and more than a trace of nobility about it, and, brightened by the stirring performance of Barry Jones in the leading role, it is a powerful and admirably provocative play.

It is certainly not being captious about Mr. Anderson to say that it is more exciting when it leans on Plato than when it falls back on the Socratic apochrypha of the dramatist. I mention this without any pretense of being an expert on the Greek philosophers, but because the play is unquestionably at its best in the trial scene where Plato is his authority and has less force in, for example, the scene just before the death of Socrates, where the playwright has relied on his own invention. But, even though there may be occasional quibbles, Mr. Anderson deserves vast credit for making the drama of ideas stimulating.

Spartans and Russians

Although he has certainly not been averse to drawing modern parallels, he merits, I think, high commendation for rarely emphasizing them too much. At moments, he is a little emphatic about pointing out similarities between the ancient Spartans and the modern Bolsheviks, and here he is at his weakest. In general, however, he has wisely been satisfied to dramatize the tremendous issue of the need for free inquiry in a democratic society in the terms of his subject matter and let the possible contemporary implications speak for themselves. And there seems to me no question that he has made the topic dramatically exciting.

It is, naturally enough, at its best in the all-important scene of the trial, when Socrates defends himself before his Athenian accusers against the charge of undermining the security of the state by his insistence on complete intellectual liberty. It was immensely important, as Shaw realized in his "Saint Joan," that the side advocating the necessity of limiting free inquiry should make its case powerfully and impressively, and Mr. Anderson, with proper aid from Plato, has seen to this with complete honesty. The result is that the scene is both emotionally and intellectually exciting and not readily to be forgotten.

Barry Jones

In the early sections of the play, where the character of Socrates is being established, there is a certain thinness of writing, but here, as in the entire drama, the playing of Barry Jones is brilliantly helpful. Mr. Jones makes Socrates warm, human and humorous, and at the same time never fails to suggest the intellectual calibre of the man. His indication of the change in the philosopher, who at first sees his own trial as a sort of joyous mental game and then accepts the tremendous importance of what he is fighting for, is superbly managed. He doesn't even falter in the questionable final scene where Socrates refuses to accept his life from the hands of the totalitarian Spartan king.

Among his other achievements, Mr. Anderson manages to rehabilitate the memory of the usually scorned Xantippe, and, while I suspect that the shrewish but loyal wife occasionally gets in the way of the drama, the role is attractively written, and Lotte Lenya plays it admirably. William Hansen handles the powerful attack on Socrates' defense of complete intellectual freedom excellently, and there is a good performance by George Mathews as the Spartan totalitarian. Indeed, the acting in general is helpful, and so, as usual, is Boris Aronson's setting. I think there are times when "Barefoot in Athens" doesn't quite live up to its subject matter, but it is nevertheless a drama of absorbing interest.

The New York Times

November 1, 1951

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Maxwell Anderson's new drama has all the virtues except brilliance and vitality. He calls it "Barefoot in Athens"; it opened at the Martin Beck last evening. In terms of the career of Socrates it speaks a good word for freedom in the life of political societies.

Late in the play there is one dramatic scene when Socrates goes on trial for his life before a democratic jury. You can draw whatever comforting or frightening parallels you wish between demogoguery today and the contest between wit and witch-hunting in the Athens of the fifth century before Christ. For Mr. Anderson has drawn them, not only out of history, but out of his private convictions as a citizen of the United States today.

* * *

Out of respect for Mr. Anderson's integrity and ability this column does not wish to belittle his achievement. But in art it is not enough to stand for high principles. Art supposes more than that—originality, passion, enlightenment, even style if nothing more. "Barefoot in Athens" lacks the virtues that put some glow into the theatre. The play is high-minded and pedestrian, sincere and perfunctory. Even the performance is hardly more than polite.

Is there a Shavian point of view to the first half of the play, or is Socrates a Shavian character? At any rate, Mr. Anderson does sketch him in barefoot and without historical grandeur, as Shaw would have done. Despite his purity of spirit, he is a fairly irritating old man—constantly bickering at home and in the streets and confusing his opponents with skeptical questions. No wonder Xantippe is vexed and his opponents infuriated, especially when they are hunting a scapegoat on whom to blame the defeat of Athens.

This is the place where the impressive scene occurs. Facing the great jury and under the stern brow of the Acropolis, Socrates argues less for his life than for truth and the glory of free Athens. Visually, the scene has been dramatically planned inside Boris Aronson's most powerful setting; and the actors are at their best in this bitter argument. Barry Jones' portrait of Socrates is most affecting in this scene; for, despite his sense of detachment, Socrates is hurt by the decision of his fellow citizens against him.

But even here Mr. Anderson's writing is too generalized to express the full importance of this inquiry into truth and freedom. It is solemn without being exalting. For, all its scholarship and nobility of purpose, "Barefoot In Athens" is an uninspired piece of writing for the stage.

Nor is the performance, under Alan Anderson's direction, much livelier than the play, although the individual performances are interesting and skillful. Perhaps the fact that Mr. Jones is a practiced actor in Shaw plays accounts for the light humor of his characterization. This is not the Socrates that you may be expecting from reading the grave books of history. But it is probably the quizzical Socrates that Mr. Anderson intended, and on those terms it is quick-witted and amusing.

* * *

Lotte Lenya gives an excellent performance as Socrates' harrassed, acid-tongued though affectionate wife who has much to perplex her. As the bumbling though good-natured King of Sparta, George Mathews is wonderfully entertaining. His cheerful stupidity and artless candor are as tonic as anything in the play. As the perfumed, professional courtesan, Helen Shields is bright, shrewd and good company. There are vigorously described characterizations by Philip Coolidge, David J. Stewart, Bruce Hall, William Hansen and others in a long cast.

But neither the play nor the performance pulls these individual bits into the shape of a coherent and integrated work of art. "Barefoot in Athens" comes to life intermittently. Most of it is not only barefoot but heavy-footed and slow.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

November 1, 1951

By WALTER F. KERR

Needs Shoes in Manhattan

IN "BAREFOOT IN ATHENS," Maxwell Anderson is championing the cause of free inquiry and free discussion in a democracy. He has chosen Socrates, the man who "likes to go up and down the streets questioning and doubting," as his symbol, and he has been able to establish a reasonable parallel between the pressures which were once brought to bear on Socrates and those which are intimidating free men today.

Mr. Anderson is a responsible man and a responsible dramatist. His vision of the dangers which are in store for democracy the moment it decides to stifle criticism is an accurate and perceptive one.

* * *

But the play which opened at the Martin Beck last night has presented its author with some seemingly insuperable problems. For one thing, the speculative philosopher, the man of doubt, is not an especially dramatic figure. It is the dogmatists, however much we may disagree with them, who set the world on fire, and thereby turn themselves into tragic heroes; the spectacle of a gentle, reasonable, and uncertain man being hounded to death does not provide the clash and fury of robust theater.

For another, Mr. Anderson has not been able to work out his parable in concrete and illuminating episodes. It is made clear early in the play that Socrates is to go on trial for introducing new gods of his own and for corrupting the thinking of Athenian youth. In the trial scene late in the play these issues are introduced again, and debated.

* * *

But between these two rather distant points the author has not shown us the man at work. He does not deal with, or develop, the religious issues at all; and he does not show us the youth of Athens coming under the great man's spell. We are, instead, drawn into discursive arguments with run-of-the-mill politicians—Critias, who feels that present dangers to the nation preclude any criticism of the nation, and the King of Sparta, who feels that wisdom is no substitute for brute authority.

Even those qualities of mind which most characterize the great Athenian for us are skimped in favor of political rhetoric. We are given a sample of the Socratic method in one of the earlier passages, but it is on a trivial theme—it just happens that the Fool in "Twelfth Night" disposes of the same dialetical problem more briefly and rather more charmingly—and when we come to the climactic trial scene we are not too much better off. Mr. Anderson does supply his hero with a flash of rational brilliance here, and for a moment we are excited; but he cuts it off rather abruptly with an unexpected emotional outburst which is more surprising than moving, and the great ultimate point of contest is never reached.

The play is additionally unfortunate in its staging. Alan Anderson has not been able to bring his costume groupings to brisk life. They are pictorially muddy and frequently without any kind of emphasis. The people do not always seem secure on the stage, and when a harlot must rush in from the wings with the news that Athens has been defeated by Sparta, the effect is for all the world like the news of a football victory in "The College Widow."

Barry Jones gives us an engaging, soft-spoken Socrates. But the director's notion that this must be accented by outrageous overplaying by some of the other actors is not a happy one. Bart Burns is made to give a grotesque performance as the hangman, and George Matthews is nearly a cartoon as the Spartan king. Lotte Lenya, however, brings just the right balance of style and feeling to the role of Xantippe; Philip Coolidge makes an incisive Critias, and Daniel Reed gives the evening its greatest fire as Crito.

The problem Mr. Anderson poses is interesting and relevant. The play he has written is sketchy, and curiously without zest.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

November 1, 1951

Liberty or Death 2500 Years Ago

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

It is a democracy permitting an endless search for truth that serves as the theme of Maxwell Anderson's new play about Socrates, called "Barefoot in Athens."

It may occur to you that government by majority has progressed very little since the fifth century B. C., as you watch the philosopher condemned for his insistence that men should accept no laws, morals or customs without questioning them.

Socrates is depicted as an ugly old gentleman of 70, whose intellectual clarity, and contentment with his own solution, raises him above normal temper or desires. Material lacks do not interest him, nor do the human emotions around him. Similar objectivity characterizes the play. It is level and mostly placid, with little action and a good deal of very clear, unexalted conversation.

He's the Fall Guy.

Socrates is perfectly willing to agree that the constant questioning he demands can produce wrong. According to his enemies, it already has, in Athens' occupation by Sparta. The old boy is the fall guy for his fellow citizen's discontent. He even foregoes a chance to escape when he finds that nowhere else in the Mediterranean world can he talk and argue at will. He dies rather than subject himself to censorship.

Anderson has used a simple, direct method of presenting his facts. He restates Socrates' arguments, rarely using them as a springboard for elaborations of his own.

The play keeps the characters homely, while the production never strains dramatic tension to raise the level of theatrical in-

terest. It is as much pageant as drama.

The Devastating Closeup.

To diminish the stature of historically important personages until they look like your neighbors, can be perilously close to an automatic joke. If the process is not meant to be funny, they need added eloquence to keep history's estimate from seeming a hoax.

While "Barefoot in Athens" is certainly clear and sturdy, and much of it is memorable, I wish it could have more shine and be more stimulating.

Barry Jones is excellent as Socrates, patient, honest and impersonal. In his beard and robe, he walks with a little rock, and has the arched spine, out-thrust hands, and back-drawn head, to vividly suggest the philosopher of statues. He gives the impression of talking kindly to people who are intellectual children.

And Mrs. Socrates.

I very much liked Lotte Lenya as his wife, Xantippe, forced into shrewishness by her husband's improvident life of the mind. She adds vastly to the play's two most touching scenes between the husband and wife.

George Mathews gives the King of Sparta assurance so arrogant he can afford to be casual and indulgent. William Hansen makes a much needed solid score in the trial scene.

Daily Mirror

November 1, 1951

'Barefoot in Athens' Is Anderson at His Best

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Maxwell Anderson brings stature to an American theatre that sorely needs it with "Barefoot in Athens," which arrived at the Martin Beck last evening under the auspices of the Playwrights' Company. It is a timely play, with a reminder rather than a message for people who think.

Anderson's thesis is that the small city-state of Athens became great in history because it was a democracy, as contrasted with the totalitarian Sparta. Democracy, he admits, has its faults, and he points many of them out, but its crowning virtues are that it offers freedom of speech, trial by jury and the right to seek the truth.

Citizens of a democracy who sit on juries do not always arrive at correct verdicts. Despite this, every man is considered innocent until proven guilty. One of the most exciting and moving episodes in the script has to do with the trial and condemnation to death of the philosopher, Socrates. That was a bad verdict, as we see it today.

Against the gadfly Socrates, protagonist of liberty, human dignity and freedom of thought, Anderson pits Pausanias, Spartan tyrant, who revels in being called "Stupid." Ironically, it is "Stupid" who develops a fondness for Socrates, whom he insists on dubbing "Brilliant." As Frederick the Great brought Voltaire to his court, Pausanias would do with Socrates.

The tyrant even arranges a last-minute escape for the philosopher who fascinates him, but when Socrates learns that he will be permitted to expound his ideas and seek truth only behind palace walls, he will have none of it. He prefers the hemlock to limits on his liberty.

"Barefoot in Athens" is a stirring, stimulating and affectionate study of the philosopher with the ugly face and the glowing soul. It catches the wit, the esential dignity, the mind and the heart of the genius who spurned riches to teach men how to think and question.

It is a rewarding, though demanding play. It is not likely to prove a magnet for "escapist" playgoers. In fact, it is not aimed at them. But it is a tribute to the intelligence of those who go to the theatre seeking something more than mere entertainment. It is Anderson at his best, and that, in our opinion, is the best that America has to offer.

There is a touchingly human, heart- and mind-warming recreation of Socrates by Barry Jones. You are not likely to encounter such distinction as he brings to the stage for many semesters to come. This welcome visitor from England is a great actor. George Mathews is quite wonderful as "Stupid," the Spartan King. It is by all odds his outstanding performance to date.

Philip Coolidge plays the greedy oligarch, Critias, to perfection. His conception of the role is excellent, and his diction admirable. William Hansen is fine indeed in the trial scene as the relentless prosecutor, Lykon, he of the one-track mind. Helen Shields is delightfully feminine as the courtesan, Theodote, and Lotte Lenya etches Zantippe with sincerity rather than brilliance.

Alan Anderson—Max's son—makes an auspicious debut as a director in New York. He has grasped the intent of his dramatist sire, and given the play just what his father wanted it to have. Boris Aronson has contributed servicable settings.

We recommend "Barefoot in Athens" to you. In our book, it is a "must." It is one of the few plays of our time that justifies many hearings. Count us among those who will be repeat visitors to the Martin Beck.

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER

November 1, 1951

Anderson's 'Barefoot in Athens' A Fine Comedy to Stir the Mind

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Maxwell Anderson's "Barefoot in Athens," which the Playwrights' Company brought to the Martin Beck Theatre last evening, is a fine and sunny play in which Barry Jones gives a fine and sunny performance as Socrates, the gentleman from Athens who talked himself into drinking the world's most famous cup of poison.

It is a new kind of play for Mr. Anderson and I think it is one of his best. Usually, when he deals with the great figures of history, he resorts to heroic prose and even more heroic verse, doing so because time and legend have made these kings and queens and lovers seem somewhat bigger than life size. In "Barefoot in Athens" he looks upon the immortal Greek as a simple man—simple not only in his poor man's rags and unshod feet, but simple in his mind. Not stupid, this mind, but a clear one which is easily understood. So when Mr. Anderson writes of Socrates he must write simply, and his prose has the warmth and lucidity of the sunlit air in the philosopher's beloved city.

Worth Thinking For, Too.

"Barefoot in Athens" is not a play of much physical event, nor does it strive for great emotional heights and depths. There are two well-placed scenes which stir the heart, both involving the relationship of the philosopher with his wife, Xantippe, and the last of which is the closing moment of the play when, after Socrates and Xantippe have repeated a beautiful prayer, a prison guard brings the goblet of hemlock. The burden of the comedy is not so much that Socrates is worth fighting for or weeping over, but that he is worth thinking about. He spent his life thinking, and by padding about Athens as an odd-looking inquiring reporter he tried to prod the youth of the city into thinking, too. For this he was condemned.

A Fine Xantippe.

In "Barefoot in Athens" Socrates is Democracy—Democracy as it was in the last days of a golden age and as it must be now if some other blessed era lies ahead. This Democracy is worth fighting for and worth weeping over should it fade; but—and this is Mr. Anderson's point—its greatest need is to be thought about. If it lives, it must live in men's minds first of all. If it is in the mind it cannot be killed, just as Socrates' own cheerful death made him eternal.

Mr. Jones' performance is splendid in its clarity and humor, and his defense of the philosopher in the trial scene is irresistibly persuasive. Lotte Lenya is admirable as the drab and rebellious Xantippe, who forever scolds about her husband's poverty but who, in her secret heart, thinks as he does. Another excellent performance—and an excellent conceit on the part of Mr. Anderson—is George Mathews' King Pausanias of Sparta, known to friend and enemy by the name of Stupid. Stupid is not as stupid as he appears; he is the practical politician, the fascist, the communist, the dictator. He is baffled by the bungling inefficiency of Democracy and prefers a practical business management of man's affairs—but somehow he is drawn to it. Socrates' starry vision of a free society fascinates him in spite of himself. It is a fine and truly humorous role and Mr. Mathews acts it most engagingly.

Others of a good company are Bart Burns as an executioner, Philip Coolidge as a dictatorial overseer of a conquered democratic state and Helen Shields as a scented prostitute. The settings, by Boris Aronson, are fittingly simple, and so is Alan Anderson's direction.

"The Number"

New York Post

October 31, 1951

By Richard Watts Jr.

Return of the Gang Melodrama

Having a skilled hand in such matters, George Abbott has staged "The Number," a play by Arthur Carter about racketeers in action, with the sort of detail that makes for conviction. Since all of us have been long calling for a good, unashamed melodrama, the result, as unveiled at the Biltmore Theater last night, is a pleasant and increasingly entertaining evening of suspense and excitement, certainly not distinguished as playwriting, but shrewd, tense and well-acted. It is the kind of thing that beats the movies at their own game.

As you might guess from the title, Mr. Carter's new melodrama deals with that complex, mysterious and sinister business known as the numbers racket. Not being exactly an expert about this great contemporary industry, I must confess that I found some of its details a trifle confusing, but even the play's account of the way in which the office of one of these big business men is conducted struck me as instructive, as well as adding greatly to the verisimilitude of the proceedings. After that, the play wastes some time on the home life of its heroine, but, once it gets into its melodrama, it is expert and effective.

Murvyn Vye

A large part of its pleasant excitement is the result of a wonderfully skillful performance of the big-shot racketeer by the unfailing Murvyn Vye. Mr. Vye is an actor of vast dynamic force, who never wastes a point and can combine the sinister with the humorous to the most telling effect. He is the menace of "The Number," but he is also its most entertaining character, and he gives the melodrama the sort of growing suspense and tingling excitement that is so necessary to its effectiveness. "The Number" is decidedly his show.

The story, after it gets through with the rather tedious domesticity of its heroine, tells how a young wife, who has left her dull husband for the more exciting career of a job in the office of the numbers racketeer, gets entangled with a youthful gangster, who is either in love with her or is using her to make some money at the expense of her boss. I may be giving away some of the plot that is supposed to be kept a secret, but the saving part of the romantic interest is that the dashing young fellow turns out to be a scoundrel.

Please don't expect anything in the way of originality of approach or brilliance of writing in "The Number." That isn't what it is up to. I would imagine that there is nothing in it that would be a novelty in the movies, save some of its talk. But, as soon as it has got down to business and begins concerning itself with Mr. Vye's relentless tracking down of the conspiracy to do him out of some of his ill-gotten gains, it increasingly captures the primitive excitement that is the purpose of melodrama and really achieves its effects.

It is excellently played throughout. Although the evening is essentially Mr. Vye's triumph, there is an honest and expert performance by a film actor named Dane Clark as the younger racketeer, and Martha Scott is excellent as the foolish and put-upon wife, although hers is not exactly an exciting role. The minor parts, too, are admirably managed, particularly by Luis Van Rooten as the girl's racketeering uncle, by Guy Thomajan as a gang henchman, by Diana Herbert as a casual waitress, and by Jennie Goldstein, of the Yiddish theater, as the heroine's mother. "The Number" is a conventional but agreeably suspenseful melodrama.

"THE NUMBER"

"Melodrama by Arthur Carter; staged by George Abbott; settings by Ralph Alswang; costumes by Jocelyn; presented by Paul Vroom and Irving Cooper at the Biltmore Theatre, October 30, 1951. The cast:

Dottie.....Peggy Nelson
Sylvia.....Martha Scott
Alice.....Louise Larabee
Maury.....Murvyn Vye
Lennie.....Luis Van Rooten
Bessie Berger..Jennie Goldstein
Hyman Berger.....
Anatole Winogradoff
Judy.....Lydia Reed
Dominic Spizzilini..Dane Clark
Waitress.....Diana Herbert
Dolly.....Bobby Vail
Si.....Jay Barney
Guido.....Guy Thomajan

Synopsis: Act I, Scene 1. Maury's office. A December afternoon. Scene 2. The Berger kitchen. Three weeks later—7 p.m. Scene 3. Corner of a restaurant on a highway miles outside of town. A week later—9 p.m. Scene 4. Four telephone areas. Three days later. Act II. Scene 1. A tourist cabin outside the city. Several hours later. Scene 2. The Berger kitchen. The next day—Sunday noon. Scene 3. Maury's office. Thirty minutes later. Act III. The Berger kitchen. An hour later.

Journal American

October 31, 1951

Hails 'Stalwart' Acting In Bright Melodrama

By ROBERT GARLAND

Although Dane Clark and Martha Scott are, in the order of their mention, starred, Murvyn Vye and Louise Larabee take over "The Number" at the Biltmore. I haven't seen such stalwart acting in a melodrama for many a theatregoing day. Especially the acting of Mr. Vye, who seems to lend himself to this exciting sort of thing.

And "The Number," written by Arthur Carter, is certainly exciting. That's what it tries to be! Thanks to Mr. Carter and the direction of George Abbott, it never falters to give you time to think. It builds relentlessly among the scenery of Ralph Alswang. It reaches a climax. Then it relaxes. After that it shuts down and smiles.

It has every right to shut down and smile as far as I'm concerned. For the melodrama in W. 47th st. is simply melodrama and nothing more. It doesn't mean a subtle thing. It doesn't have a hidden message. Paul Vroom and Irving Cooper, who produced it in association with William Gostin Jr., evidently thought it was a real good show.

Well, "The Number" is a real good show. It is also excellently produced.

• • •

Lot of Trouble

Some day somebody is going to write a play showing how the gambling parlors—the numbers, the horses and the others—get their telephones installed without the installers knowing what they're doing. But this is definitely not the play. "The Number" is about Sylvia, who falls in love with Dominic, and gets in a lot of on-stage trouble.

It is through Dominic that we meet Maury and Alice, who are Murvyn Vye and Louise Larabee in real life. By the time the third scene of the second act comes along, there is something genuinely melodramatic to enact. For this is when the number—and, in a smaller way, the horse—racketeer decides to, as it were, clean out his house.

He cleans it out, too, in an interlude that is made for playing. Slowly, but as surely as death and taxes, this interlude falls into the acting orbit of Mr. Vye. And, not to give the plot away, Mr. Vye makes the most of it. Helped by Miss Larabee. But the interlude is praisable for writing, too. And for direction.

The third and last act is melodrama as well, easing off as it should.

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Tough Assignment

As has been written, "The Number" provides a field-day for Murvyn Vye. If you don't remember him saying "For this relief, much thanks" in John Gielgud's "Hamlet," if you can't imagine him playing straight to Milton Berle, you surely saw him as Jud in "Oklahoma" and as Jigger in "Carousel." This, then, is a follow-up natural.

And it is the author's fault if Louise Larabee falls naturally into the Alice who works along with him. Miss Larabee, who was also in "Carousel," is right for the role. For you must play melodrama as if you enjoyed it. And, at the same time, you must not seem to enjoy it. It's a tough assignment. But it pays in "The Number."

Dane Clark and Martha Scott are as starrified as they can be under the circumstances. Especially Mr. Clark. And it is nice to see Jennie Goldstein as an unsuspecting midtown mamma. And Diana Herbert, who instructed me in "Clutterbuck" on the summer circuit, as an amusing waitress. And several of the helpful others.

Melodrama may not be fashionable nowadays. But "The Number" is fashionable enough with me.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 31, 1951

By WALTER F. KERR

Wrong Number

The season could stand a good melodrama, and "The Number," which opened at the Biltmore Tuesday night, has some of the ingredients: a racketeering atmosphere suitable to mayhem, some sharp bits of stage business which are very likely the contribution of director George Abbott, and a few plot surprises along the way.

But Arthur Carter's play is not taut enough, or tough enough, for an engrossing evening on the rifle range. It has a low boiling point, and takes three or four scenes to establish some fairly simple standard plot mechanics. It diffuses itself with so much circuitous conversation that one scene—in which a numbers operator wins a guileless lass over to his nefarious purposes—seems to begin four times over. And, most distractingly of all, it keeps shifting its focus back and forth from the tourist cabins and the numbers headquarters in which something exciting might happen to a domestic background in which everything that happens smacks strongly of soap-opera.

* * *

Carter's story casts Martha Scott as an unhappily married middle-class girl who finds her way into the offices of a numbers king, becomes romantically involved with an operator who is trying to beat her boss' machine, is caught in some of her lover's shadier machinations, and then must face the fact that she has been duped heartwise as well.

Miss Scott brings a wistful dignity and an undeniable attractiveness to all of this. But she is playing a remarkably simple-minded girl. And it falls to her to mouth most of the play's soupier sentiments as she finds herself leaving mother, father and child behind her in her headlong affair. She must announce, in a loud, clear voice, "I am a wife and mother, but I'm also a woman," a locution normally reserved to the pages of the less imposing women's magazines. Later in the play she must challenge her lover thus: "You made a new woman of me. What am I going to do with that woman now?" In the circumstances, it is not surprising that the actress, for all her personal charm and skill, cannot put a top on the play's emotional scenes. As the evening works itself to a climax, she becomes hollower and hollower, and whatever drive the play has picked up in its racketeering scenes it loses in its romantic ones.

Dane Clark, as the man responsible for the double-cross, is effective in his more reserved and realistic moments. But he, too, is at the mercy of the whipped-up language of the later portions of the play, and he emerges hot-eyed and turgid rather than honestly intense.

If the evening belongs to any of the actors, it belongs to Murvyn Vye, whose throaty affability goes a long way toward redeeming one of those heart-of-gold portraits of a gangster. Mr. Vye does slap a few women around in the course of his activities, but he is an agreeable soul for all that—a laughing, damned villain, you might say.

There are probably just too many innocents in "The Number" for a really satisfactory thriller. There is a weeping mother, a heartbroken child, a grieving husband, a heroine more sinned against than sinning, and even the menace is somehow genial. Evidences of director Abbott's taste and intelligence are everywhere: in a brief but choice sketch of a slatternly waitress, in a difficult triple-inquisition scene which might well have proved static, in the effective underplaying of some busy telephone sequences. But the play lacks bite; it doesn't even really growl often enough.

The New York Times

October 31, 1951

Dane Clark and Martha Scott in a Melodrama About the Underworld, 'The Number'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

There is a fine moral lesson to be derived from "The Number," which was acted at the Biltmore last evening. But the excitement in Arthur Carter's new melodrama is pretty hollow. The moral an innocent playgoer might carry away from it is that gamblers are people to avoid. They are unscrupulous, treacherous, suspicious and careless with firearms. Furthermore, they break the law.

But a playgoer might avoid them also because they are not interesting people. Mr. Carter seems to be sketching in the thrilling romance of the underworld. You see three girls taking hoss-bets and numbers over the telephone, while their employer, played with amusing cynicism by Murvyn Vye, growls, roars, snaps his fingers and makes himself generally undesirable.

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To show the full depravity of the underworld, Mr. Carter is describing the cyclonic love affair between Spizzilini, a bad man, and Sylvia, a good girl—or at any rate, a comparatively good girl. She thinks he loves her for her own sake. But he is really romancing her because she is head-clerk for a gambling tycoon and can manipulate his betting account in his favor. By easy stages this leads to unpleasant things, including a number of indelicate words and a murder.

George Abbott, who likes racy yarns about uncouth malefactors, has staged "The Number" with a good deal of relish. Collaborating with the author he has taken pains to make the withering wise-cracks explode at exactly the right moment. They are generally funny, especially when Mr. Vye snarls a thug's philosophy out of one corner of his mouth, or Jennie Goldstein makes a few household remarks about her husband's relatives. Miss Goldstein does not have much to do, but she manages to make everything salty.

Some other good actors keep the performance moving from one squalid crisis to another. Dane Clark plays the heel with enthusiasm and unction. Martha Scott plays the upright young lady who is overwhelmed with his Italian passion. Although she is intelligent about the part, she is not exactly suited to it. Maybe she is slumming in a melodrama as gaudy as "The Number." Louise Larabee is happier than Miss Scott in this sort of nonsense, and she gives an excellent performance as a terrified moll.

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But Mr. Vye's guttural, evil-faced gambler is the most pungent character of all, and "The Number" is most entertaining when he is malevolently presiding over its iniquities. Ralph Alswang, scene designer, has carried the tale through a number of model kitchens, hotel rooms and wire-rooms, successfully removing gambling from sordid environments. Good Housekeeping need not hesitate to place its seal of approval on some of the interiors where Mr. Carter's characters break the laws of our worldly society. But the settings at least have a point of view.

Mr. Carter's melodrama cannot quite make up its mind about who is good and who is bad and for what reasons. A theatregoer should not be required to make these moral decisions for himself.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 31, 1951

Some Laughs in 'The Number'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Last night's audience intermittently had a lot of laughs at "The Number."

The reason it did not have a better time is that neither play nor the performance of it ever makes up its mind whether this is a rip-roaring melodrama or a satire on a soap opera. If everybody had let his hair down and voted for the latter, the evening could have been an endless scream.

The way things stand you have to go on guessing. You cannot take it seriously because the characters are so synthetic and the plot depends on such coincidence.

The Old Game.

The heroine clerks in the office of a numbers racketeer. She breaks the rules of the house by seeing a gambler who bets against her boss. She has an affair with him and finally gets into real trouble when he plays a winner through her. She forgets to make the bet until after the numbers are known.

She discovers that the gambler has made a habit of thus moving in on the girls in her office. At the end she is almost taken in by his assertions of true love.

The play works up to big emotional scenes, only to crack the tension wide open with a wild gag, just before a climax. Its humor is often extravagantly crude. Its characters are pummeled out of shape for purposes of plot. Their switches of mood and veracity are as chaotic as these in an Antonio Moreno serial.

The script is crammed with cliches like "What shall I do?" "I been going crazy" and "I'm